



Sibling relationships in adults who have siblings with or without intellectual disabilities

Mairéad A. Doody^a, Richard P. Hastings^{a,*}, Sarah O'Neill^b, Ian M. Grey^c

^aSchool of Psychology, Bangor University, UK

^bDepartment of Psychology, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

^cRoyal College of Surgeons in Ireland - Medical University of Bahrain, Bahrain

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ABSTRACT

There is relatively little research on the relationships between adults with intellectual disability and their siblings, despite the potential importance of these relationships for either individual's psychological well-being and future care roles that might be adopted by adult siblings. In the present study, sibling relationships of adults with adult siblings with ($N=63$) and without ($N=123$) intellectual disability were explored. Contact, warmth, conflict, and rivalry were measured using questionnaires available as an on-line survey. Expressed emotion was measured using the Five Minute Speech Sample over the telephone to establish an independently coded measure of criticism from the participant towards their sibling. Overall, there were few group differences in contact and sibling relationship. There was less telephone contact in the intellectual disability group, and less reported warmth in the relationship with siblings with intellectual disability although this was mainly associated with severe/profound intellectual disability. Exploratory analyses were conducted of the correlates of sibling relationships in both the intellectual disability and control groups. These analyses revealed a small number of different associations especially for conflict, which was lower when either the participant or sibling was younger in the control group but associated with relative age in the intellectual disability group.

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The most long-lasting and enduring relationship an individual develops during the lifespan is the sibling relationship (Cicirelli, 1982). The literature on adult sibling relationships has mainly focused on two fields of enquiry. The first is on factors relating to the quality of sibling relationships including gender, birth order, family size, and age differences between siblings (Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999; Lee, 1990; Newman, 1991; Pulakos, 1987, 1990). For example, research by Dolgin and Lindsay (1999) on disclosure between college students and their siblings, revealed that later-born siblings disclosed more to their siblings than earlier-born siblings. Siblings from smaller families have been shown to communicate more than those from larger families (Newman, 1991), and sibling relationships of females have been found to be more intimate than those of males (Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999; Pulakos, 1987).

The second field of enquiry has addressed the functions and features associated with adult sibling relationships (Dolgin & Lindsay, 1999; Riggio, 2000; Stewart et al., 2001; Stocker, Lanthier & Furman, 1997), frequency of contact (White & Riedmann, 1992), and the importance of sibling relationships compared to other close relationships (Cicirelli, 1980; Floyd, 1995; Pulakos, 1989). Stocker et al. (1997) identified three dimensions of adult sibling relationships using factor analysis

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: r.hastings@bangor.ac.uk (R.P. Hastings).

methods: warmth, conflict, and rivalry. White and Riedmann (1992) demonstrated that 50% of their sample of 7730 adults reported seeing or talking to their sibling at least once a month and that genetic closeness affected emotional closeness among siblings. In contrast, Lee (1990) demonstrated that geographic proximity, emotional closeness, and feeling responsible for a sibling's welfare primarily explained the motivation to make contact among siblings. Findings on the closeness between adult siblings are also mixed: Pulakos (1989) showed that adults feel closer to their friends, whereas Floyd (1995) failed to find any differences in closeness between friends and siblings. The life transitional events of divorce, loss of family members, and becoming a parent, have been associated with stronger emotional bonds among adult siblings (Connidis, 1992).

In typical sibling relationships, dimensions such as closeness and frequency of contact will vary considerably dependent on dyadic differences in variables such as gender and age as discussed above. However, some sibling relationships might be assumed to be more challenging because they involve individuals who have very different abilities and life experiences. In particular, focusing on the topic of the present research, the life experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities may be very different compared to their non-disabled siblings. For example, the prevalence of out-of-family residential placements in England is 1.68/1000 for individuals with intellectual disabilities aged 16 years or over (Braddock, Emerson, Felce, & Stancliffe, 2001). Thus, the majority of young adults and adults with intellectual disabilities remain living with their parents in the family home. Although there is a substantial research literature on the experiences of siblings of children with intellectual disabilities (see Rossiter & Sharpe, 2001 for a meta-analysis), few studies have extended the investigation of the sibling bond into the adult years.

Adult siblings tend to maintain high levels of involvement with their brothers and sisters with intellectual disability, and continue to have strong affective ties across the life course (Orsmond & Seltzer, 2000; Pruchno, Patrick, & Burant, 1996). However, the extent of sibling contact is related to gender: sisters typically play a more supportive role than brothers (Orsmond & Seltzer, 2000; Seltzer, Begun, Seltzer, & Krauss, 1991; Zetlin, 1986). Furthermore, sibling support varies according to the type of support with the focus more likely to be on emotional than practical dimensions (Pruchno et al., 1996; Seltzer et al., 1991). Other variables predicting current involvement and shared activities with adult siblings with intellectual disabilities include lower levels of support when the sibling has young children, increased support when the siblings had an emotionally close relationship during adolescence, and lower levels of behavior problems in the affected sibling (Greenberg, Seltzer, Orsmond, & Krauss, 1999; Orsmond & Seltzer, 2007; Orsmond, Kuo, & Seltzer, 2009), and diagnostic differences especially more contact and positive relationships when the sibling has Down syndrome compared to autism (Hodapp & Urbano, 2007; Orsmond & Seltzer, 2007). In terms of positive affect in the sibling relationship, Orsmond et al. (2009) found that adult males with a sister with Autism Spectrum Disorder reported the lowest levels and females with a sister the highest levels. Positive affect in the sibling relationship was also positively related to parental support.

In addition to the general importance of sibling relationships throughout the life course for human development, there is evidence that adult sibling relationships when one individual has an intellectual disability may be significant in at least two practical ways. First, closer or more positive sibling relationships may be associated with the well-being of the non-disabled adult. Seltzer, Greenberg, Krauss, Gordon, and Judge (1997) found that the well-being of the non-disabled sibling was associated with a closer relationship with the person with intellectual disability, and 87% of siblings reported that the impact of the sibling with intellectual disability on a range of life domains was "mainly positive". Siblings with closer relationships with their brother or sister with intellectual disabilities have also reported more rewards from the experience (Hodapp & Urbano, 2007).

A second practical effect relates to adult siblings' potential role as the future main carer for their brother or sister. Krauss, Seltzer, Gordon, and Friedman (1996) reported that 19% of the families included in their longitudinal study included a sibling who expected to co-reside with their brother/sister with intellectual disability. In practice, perhaps half of those expecting to be involved with future care might actually end up co-residing (Freedman, Krauss, & Seltzer, 1997). Siblings were more likely to plan to co-reside with their brother or sister with less severe functional impairments and behavior problems, and sisters were more likely than brothers to expect to co-reside with their sibling with intellectual disability (Krauss et al., 1996). Of those siblings that planned to live apart from their brother or sister with intellectual disability, around one half had weekly contact with their sibling and expected to assume legal guardianship after their parents were no longer able to do so. In terms of sibling relationships, Heller and Kramer (2009) found that adult siblings were more likely to expect to take on a future caregiving role when they currently had more contact with their sibling with intellectual disability and when they perceived their sibling as providing support to them.

In previous intellectual disability research, only limited aspects of the adult sibling relationship have been explored and there is a lack of use of standardized tools for measuring dimensions of adult sibling relationships used in the broader adult sibling research literature. Although researchers have compared the experiences of adult siblings of people with mental illness and with intellectual disability (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1999; Pruchno et al., 1996), comparisons have also been made rarely with a non-disabled comparison group (Rossiter & Sharpe, 2001).

In the present study, we focused on two research aims. Our primary aim was to explore dimensions of adult sibling relationships of adults who have adult siblings with and without intellectual disabilities. Multiple relationship dimensions were measured: contact, warmth, conflict, and rivalry in addition to participants' expressed emotion towards their sibling. Expressed emotion has been shown to be an important variable in understanding the emotional aspects of the relationship between carers (including siblings) and their relatives with mental health problems (Bullock, Bank, & Burraston, 2002; Butzlaff & Hooley, 1998; Kershner, Cohen, & Coyne, 1996; Peris & Baker, 2000). Although expressed emotion has been

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